

Claire LaRue is a medium. She has ability to connect with those across the veil which brings enlightenment and joy to loved ones left here on earth. Some in this small town see this as an abomination which must be dealt with. No matter what it takes.

WHITE CROW:
How Those in the Afterlife Saved Those Left Behind
By Judson Emens

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ONE

Beneath a stone-gray sky, black leafless branches of pin oaks and hackberries hovered over her like tarred lightning, motionless, threatening. The day was losing its battle with the approaching darkness and she knew she had no choice. Her own scent would betray her if she stayed. She made no sound as she stepped ever so slowly to the corner of the house. She could see no cars in either direction as she pushed off from the corner of the house to jump-start her momentum. In two strides she was at full speed on the downhill descent. By the third stride she heard his padded footfalls behind her. She glanced back to gauge the distance between them. Twenty-five yards, maybe. Twenty yards or more to the pecan tree across the street. His dark brown mane ringed a mammoth head and his golden eyes glowered a centuries-old instinct, implacable but without malice. The quick kill assuredly measured, his blood rose and fell with an undertow of finality. Her legs were on fire. She willed them to defy biological reality and the natural law of gravity. With every ounce of energy she possessed, she lunged for the low-slung limb of the pecan tree and dug her fingernails into the thick, rough bark. Her dead legs offered only betrayal. He sprang.

She woke to her own heavy breathing, sat up on her elbows, sweat beads crisscrossing her forehead. The red digital numerals read 10:20. Her left hand found Jenny still asleep, her face buried in long auburn curls.

This is the dream that followed Claire LaRue from Atlanta to Sheffield. The therapist said the dream is symbolic. It represents her fears and her insecurities after years of her husband's abuse and her desire to escape it. Two months ago they left him in the middle of

the night. The money she had in her purse that night took her and Jenny as far away from him as it could. Three hundred miles and one time zone away, to Sheffield, Alabama.

She and Jenny rent a room at the boarding house one block from Jackson Highway, that street that delivers the Greyhounds that deliver the strangers. Their destination windows promise arrivals in Birmingham, Atlanta, Memphis, Chattanooga and Huntsville. Hugging the south shoreline of the Tennessee River in the northwest corner of Alabama, the town of Sheffield is but a pit stop for those on their way to some big city. Tonight the 10:20 from Memphis arrived at 10:20 as it does three nights a week.

The gearing down diesel, the whining brakes, the slapping doors; harbingers of good, bad, indifferent. There's not a night that goes by that Claire doesn't wonder about those arriving in her adopted neighborhood. It's not that she is afraid of them, she's not. She does worry, however, about him being among them. The abuse of the past two years has conditioned her to worry about the most remote of possibilities.

Her landlady, Ava Fontaine, has an arrangement with the ticket agent at the bus station. Whenever a passenger asks about a place to bed down, he recommends her boarding home to them. He seems to be a good judge of character. The ones Claire has seen come through have been decent folks, not just down on their luck, but refugees of some cruel, insufferable existence. One thing they all seemed to have in common is that they don't stay long. Mostly two to three weeks before whatever's calling them or whatever's chasing them accrues enough of whatever it takes to unhinge them, and they are gone.

Jenny turned twelve two weeks ago. Claire did her best to make it as 'birthday-ish' as she could but it all seemed so staged, so stilted. Both wore fake smiles. Both forced nervous laughter. A

mature twelve year old, Jenny, is keenly aware of the gravity of their situation and like her mother, realizes they are attempting to escape the past and that, right now, there is nothing fun about that.

Most nights allow Claire to return to sleep after the arrival of the 10:20. Tonight is not one of those nights. She slid out from under the sheet and sat on the side of the bed. Elbows on knees, head in hands. She gathered herself and her thoughts.

Across the hall, Smokin' Joe and the Kickbacks pounded from the blues station on Ava's television. The giggling and low talk coming from the room meant her boyfriend was in town. Ava keeps the blues on day and night. She says the blues speak to her, that they touch her in places she didn't know she had.

The sound of a beer bottle hitting the hardwood floor but not breaking was followed by heated words and hurried footsteps. "Grady, light me a cigarette," Ava said. "I'm gonna check the door locks."

Claire heard Ava's slippers on the hardwood floor, pulled on her jeans and t-shirt and stepped into the hallway. "Ava," she said, "I need a favor."

Ava shook her half up, half down chestnut hair away from her dark brown eyes and slung a cigarette between her puckered lips as she fiddled with her robe. "What'cha need baby?"

"I can't go back to sleep. I need to take a walk." Claire looked toward Ava's room and nodded her head in that direction. "Everything okay in there?"

Ava blew a gray funnel toward the ceiling. "Yeah. Everything's cool. We gotta blow off a little steam now and then. It's all good."

“Can you keep an eye on Jenny while I take a stroll? I won’t be gone fifteen, maybe twenty minutes.”

Ava took a draw from her cigarette and said, “Not a problem, Claire. I’ll be up a bit longer. Lock the front door when you come in. Okay?”

“Thanks, Ava. I owe you.”

Muddy Waters followed Smokin’ Joe and the Kickbacks as Claire turned to go downstairs. She glanced back down the hallway to see Ava’s silhouette slicing through the television’s spectral blue-gray light.

As Claire passed the half-opened door of the downstairs boarder, she smelled whiskey and heard the television evangelist shouting to the spiritually impoverished, “JEEE-ZUSS has a plan for YOU...TONIGHT!” He violently inhaled, then, continued. “Do you hear the words coming out of my mouth? I said JEEE-ZUSS has a plan for YOU that YOU can take to the bank! JEEE-ZUSS has told me that YOU, mister and YOU ma’am, better get ready. He knows your every need and He knows WHEN you need it! So get yo’self ready. TONIGHT’s the night!”

As Claire twisted her auburn hair into a bun and reached for the doorknob, she said, “ ‘Bout time.”

TWO

Ava Fontaine began renting rooms nine years ago, after the death of her husband. She feels responsible for his death. Down deep in a place of boundless darkness, she knows without a shadow of a doubt she killed him, just as if she had put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger.

There is not a day that goes by that something doesn't trigger at least a partial memory of that night. The night that she told him she wanted a divorce. She had never seen him cry; didn't even know that he could. He was a rock, a man's man. She remembers him pacing back and forth on the sidewalk in front of the house in the pouring rain. When he came back in, he was as pitiful a sight as she had ever seen. A broken man, eyes ringed red from crying, he begged her not to leave. "Ain't we worth one more chance? For God's sake, Ava. Don't do this!"

Her mind was made up, she was packing. He took the car and left. Two hours later the police showed up and asked her if she was the wife of Pontiac Jack Fontaine. She said yes and they said they were sorry, that he had been in an accident about an hour ago and died. They didn't even come in. They said what they'd come to say, turned and left. And there Ava stood, facing the night and a future as dark as the words she'd just heard.

There is, sometimes, something undeniably good that comes from tragedy. Maybe the best thing is that it elicits good deeds from others. That, it seems, keeps mankind on the right side of the ledger. Neighbors did what neighbors should do. They lent a helping hand.

One lady traveled the hour and a half drive from Huntsville to hand Ava her contribution in person. She told Ava that tragedy is a test from the universe, a gift, even. Without adversity we haven't the capacity for our soul's growth, she'd said. "We don't have the eyes to see what we need," the lady said. "Right now, you feel your pain and your sadness. And that is what you should feel. But know this. Life unfolds as it should, like the perfection it is. Know that you are not in control. Adversity will heighten your awareness of your true self, your spirit." Ava wanted to tell her that that was the craziest damn thing she'd ever heard. But she didn't.

Ava fancies herself a song writer. She has never worked. Most think she makes money on her songs; she doesn't. She has sent some of her work to Nashville, but most of her songs end up in shoe boxes in the top of her closet. With a steady stream of boarders, she won't have to hit the bigtime. She can make it month to month like everybody else.

Ava married Pontiac Jack Fontaine seventeen years ago. He was named after an Ottawa Indian chief ancestor. His family descended from the Ottawa Indians of eastern Ontario and western Quebec who migrated to Michigan and Ohio in the 1700's. Jack's parents were from Oklahoma; their ancestors having been forced by the Americans to the Kansas and Oklahoma Indian reservations in the 1800's.

Ava met Jack at a casino. It was in Tunica, Mississippi just south of Memphis, where he told her he owned a pawn shop. She was a newly married twenty-year-old living in Tupelo, Mississippi; he was a single twenty-one-year-old living in the back room of his shop. The pawn shop thing was temporary, he told her. He said he played a wicked guitar and had plans to move to north Alabama to be a session rhythm guitarist at Muscle Shoals Sound or Fame Recording Studio in Muscle Shoals.

He had slicked-back, ink-black hair that fell in ringlets to his black and silver long-sleeved satin shirt collar. The half-inch wide gold chain around his neck, the four gold rings and the gold watch screamed race track gambler or low-rent bar owner. He wore pleated gray slacks, black spit-shined loafers and white ribbed socks. The pink lightning bolt of a scar cut through his right eyebrow looked more like decoration than scar. He had an alcohol shine in his dark brown eyes, long black lashes and high cheekbones, the color of the red clay soil of his people.

Before her second beer reached room temperature, she was in over her head and she knew it. That she could not pull herself away from him shocked and scared her but not as much as it inflamed her excitement. Coursing through her veins that night was something animalistic, an unidentifiable something inherent in all creatures red-blooded. Hours, lifetimes within themselves, passed at warp speed and held no gauge of time. By sunup Ava knew with certainty she was totally, irreversibly addicted to the new drug, Pontiac Jack Fontaine. This crazy orgasmic drug that was rattlesnake-dangerous with unknown and catastrophic side effects.

The first year was the very essence of ecstasy. The years slowed; then crawled, weighted down with dreaded possibilities that became probabilities that became unavoidable certainties that sent her life into a dizzying downward spiral. The certainty of their future was not in doubt; she knew, damn well, it would crash and burn like a one-winged plane. His alcohol and drug addiction did what alcohol and drug addictions do. Obliterate and annihilate. Everything and everybody in sight.

THREE

Claire stepped down from the front porch into July's nearly midnight heat and humidity and immediately regretted it. Across the street, old man Johnson sat rocking on his front porch in his sweat-soaked t-shirt, a lap full of Calico cat and a cooler at arm's length. He held up a cat-free hand. Claire waved back.

Even from a block away, the bus station's old, worn out fluorescents blanketed lawns, trees and houses as if they were in an old sepia-tinted photograph. Not the houses of the well-to-do, as Claire has come to learn, but castles of the common man; bricklayers, waitresses, mechanics, construction workers and truck drivers. The daily grinders who will never make any social register, but will, without fail, get the kids to school on time, pay the bills on time and get to church on time and dare anybody to say they won't. Ringed by these houses, a couple of restaurants, a gas station, the county health department and the county hospital, this stretch of Jackson Highway connects Claire's past to her present and she feels certain, her future.

The three block walk to the hospital was the same as it has been for several weeks now. Uneventful. Calming. Desolately quiet, Jackson Highway sleeps the hard sleep of the weary. Claire lit her cigarette and turned to see if Ava's light was still on. It was.

It's a one cigarette walk to the hospital if she takes her time. On especially clear nights, a slower walk helps her lose herself in the constellations. One step at a time she puts the past further behind. After a little downtime here, she always feels more like her old self. Practically good as new, or for the time being, close enough.

She flicked her cigarette in the trash can, wiped her shoes on the rubber mat and waited on the automatic sliding glass doors to grant permission to enter. She left behind the night's heat and humidity and stepped into cold, dry antiseptic air. Climate controlled sickness and death.

Out of habit, she looked into the emergency room. There were four patients, hospital protocol zombies. Only one appeared conscious enough to be considered awake. All were chin to chest, except for the old, worn out shell of a woman, glassy-eyed, mesmerized by the mobile that hung above the children's table.

Until recently, the ER waiting room was where Claire came to decompress, to find the jagged edges of herself, grab them and hold on for dear life. After a few weeks of the ER's rigid straight back chairs, she investigated the hospital for more comfortable accommodations. She found them at the third floor Intensive Care waiting area. It was like a scaled down condo, as spacious as three or four waiting rooms, with at least a half-dozen plush recliners and love seats. Two elevated television sets with remotes, a telephone and a kitchen that has yet to fail to have a pot of freshly brewed coffee. And late at night when she needs it the most, it has always been abandoned. Free of the hand-wringers of the ill-fated.

She sat back in the recliner closest to the television and closed her eyes. She took in a long, deep breath; held it, then exhaled. Again, she breathed in another, then, exhaled. Then, the familiar lightheadedness and whirring in her ears that meant only one thing.

SIX

It was a high school physics class that offered Claire a glimpse of a scientific explanation into how she was able to connect with the spirit world. Up until then she had no clue as to how she could do what she did. She simply knew she could do it.

In that class she learned that all matter is mostly empty space. When atoms are examined microscopically, physicists proved decades ago, that they are actually 99.9% space. Quantum physicists have shown that everything in the universe is energy vibrating at a variety of frequencies. Even human beings. But because humans are physical beings, our reality is rooted in what we are able to perceive from our five senses, as limited as they may be.

Energy of multiple frequencies is vibrating all around us all of the time. Cell phone and radio waves surround us unceasingly, but they vibrate at such high frequencies, our limited senses do not have the ability to pick up on them. We have to use cell phones or radios to do so.

Claire concluded from this there is something different in the “wiring” of a medium’s mind that allows them to tune in to the higher vibrations of the non-physical world. All of the space around us is not empty space; it is bursting with waves of energy at a variety of frequencies. Although most people do not perceive the higher vibrations of the spirit world, the possibility exists that they could. Science has proven that the brain is the instrument that receives and interprets information sent to it by our five physical senses. However, because our senses are so restricted, there is a limit to the frequencies that the brain can detect. An easily understood example

that showed Claire just how limited humans' abilities are is the fact that humans can only see a limited range of colors.

Colors are nothing more than vibrations of light at a certain frequency on the electro-magnetic scale that our eyes are able to perceive. The electro-magnetic scale has been proven to extend a great deal farther than the human eye can perceive, which means there are infinitely more colors than we are aware of. We simply are not able to see them.

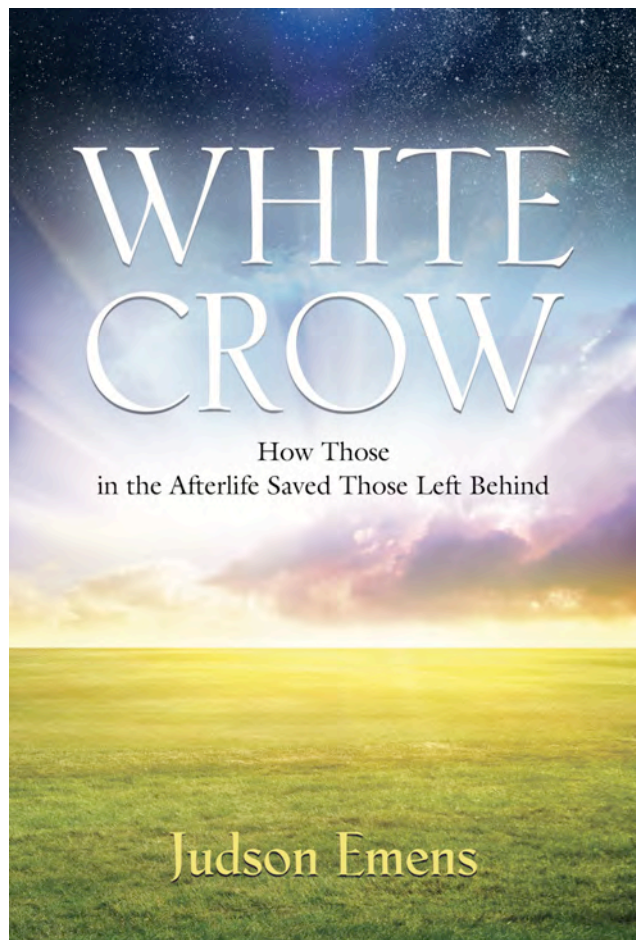
The basics of physics helped Claire with her human need to prove how she was able to do what she did. But there was a personal evolution that led her to the realization that she was on a spiritual journey with its accompanying spiritual needs, as well.

She, like most, believes in God. She was raised by parents who took her to church. She had taken a couple of courses on religions of the world while in junior college and knew that all major religions of the world believe in an afterlife. Being religious, she knew, meant belonging to a certain organized entity with a particular set of beliefs and traditions. These beliefs and traditions encourage its followers to communicate with the spirit world, particularly angels and God. She saw this as a good thing. However, at the same time, she saw that within the bounds of any religion, and particularly religions that have a subset of denominations, a problem existed. If a follower stepped outside the norms, beliefs and traditions of their religion, it drew the ire and consternation of the church. It seemed to Claire that a religion could not be a religion without imposing limitations on the follower. To her, that is too restrictive.

To grow closer to God, Claire believed, was the human's role while on their earthly journey. And that, she believed, could be accomplished with or without a church or even a religion. She believed the path to that end could be attained through the enhancement of one's spirituality, a never ending intention to be

one with God, exuding love and kindness as well as service to others during the time of our individual paths.

Ever since her early adult years, Claire committed to daily meditation to enhance her spiritual development, to develop her divinity. “That spark of the Divine is within all of us,” she has said, “that divine essence, that divine spirit, our soul.” The evolution of her mediumistic abilities has confirmed what she has always believed and that is, we are all spiritual beings having a human experience.



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